

Higher History: Essay Plan

German Domestic Policy 1870-1914

Questions:

1. (a) How far was Germany a united country during this period?
(b) To what extent was national unity a problem within Germany between 1871 and 1914?
(c) "A country united in name only." How far would you agree with this judgement on Germany during the period 1871-1914?
2. (a) How successfully did Germany deal with internal problems between 1871-1914?
(b) How successful was Germany in solving internal social and political problems between 1871 and 1914?
3. "A period of prolonged crisis". Is this an accurate assessment of 1871- 1914?
4. (a) How far did the constitutional monarchy win popular support between 1871 and 1914?
(b) "Between 1871 and 1914 the new nation state attracted little popular support." How far would you agree with reference to Germany during this period?
(c) How successful was the new German state in winning popular support during the period 1871 – 1914?

All these questions are more or less the same and require you to identify the problems facing the newly created state and how well these problems were dealt with.

Intro

A united Germany was created in 1871 and Bismarck's great ambition achieved. Industrial and commercial middle classes very much in favour of greater political unity and the war against the French had given rise to a strong wave of patriotism. But how united was the new Germany really? A number of major problems faced the rulers of the new state.

Problems

1. Rulers of the previously independent states resented the loss of their identity and power within the new Germany - particularly in the southern states. Many states were very different to Prussia and disliked intensely what they felt amounted to a Prussian takeover.
 2. Particular social groups such as the Prussian landowning Junkers disliked the new more democratic form of government. They felt that unification had reduced their aristocratic and Prussian military tradition.
 3. Relationship between the individual states and the new German government difficult - many of the southern states had quite liberal and democratic forms of government compared to the Prussian controlled and more authoritarian form of government of the new state.
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4. Major differences between industrial states of western Germany and more agricultural eastern states - free trade policies which suited the liberal middle class industrialists did not suit the conservative landowning classes who favoured a protectionist policy.
 5. Religious differences between the Catholic south and Protestant north. Bismarck questioned the loyalty of the Catholics to the new state.

6. There were significant numbers of national minorities within the Reich - Poles, Danes (Schleswig-Holstein) and the French inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine. None of them wanted to be part of the new Germany.
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7. There was also a significant and growing division between the middle and working classes which was increasing due to the rapid social and economic change.
 8. Rapid industrialisation and population growth was leading to a growing middle class who were demanding greater political power and there was the development of a mass working class in the industrial cities who were becoming increasingly politicised.
 9. These working classes were being heavily influenced by the ideas of Socialism which stood for everything that Bismarck detested and challenged the restricted democracy of the new German constitution. The growth of the Social Democratic Party posed a major problem for Bismarck.

Policies and Solutions

The Constitution (Problems 1-3): The constitution of the new Empire was a compromise between the demands of the liberals for a more unified and democratic state while satisfying the conservative elements of the Prussian aristocracy and the desire of the individual states to retain a measure of control over their own affairs. The main points of the constitution are shown in the diagram on **page 87** of your textbook.

The constitution gave legal and institutional form to a united Germany. The individual states retained considerable control over their own affairs such as education and justice and only they could levy direct taxation. On the other hand the Reichstag was a national institution which was elected by universal male suffrage and despite its limited powers did become the focal point of German national politics. A share in legislative power and the right to review the budget allowed political parties like the National Liberals to influence government policy and play a part in the shaping of the new Germany. The constitution provided a democratic framework which was ahead of much of Europe at that time. This compromise was one which was acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the German people in the 1870's.

However, most of the real power still lay with Prussia in the hands of the Kaiser and his chancellor, Bismarck. Crucially, this situation was not to change in the period under the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II up to 1914 and was therefore to leave Germany democratically stunted. Fatally, during the reign of the new Kaiser the democratically elected parliamentary government was increasingly ignored and by-passed as Wilhelm allowed the military high command to dictate both domestic and, even more seriously, foreign policy, which was to play a major part in the build up to the outbreak of the First World War (**see my handout on "German Domestic Policy under Kaiser Wilhelm II" on this**) Some historians have argued that this gave rise to the major failings of German democracy in the future as the German people were unwilling and unable to operate a truly democratic system of government after World War One leading to their rejection of the Weimar Government and their willingness to accept the dictatorship of Hitler.

Commercial Policy (Problem 4): Bismarck's policies were usually dictated by his need to have the support of one of the large parties within the Reichstag. For the first half of his period in control (1871-1879) he followed a policy of free-trade which gave him the support of the middle class industrialist Liberals. However, he was then to change to a more protectionist policy which confirmed the backing of the conservative agricultural classes. He was never able to satisfy the demands of both, but as long as he had enough support in the Reichstag, Bismarck was not too concerned where it came from.

When Kaiser Wilhelm II came to power in 1890 he at first followed a more liberal policy of free trade from 1892 to 1902 (ten year tariff agreements of Chancellor Caprivi) which stimulated the meteoric industrial growth of Germany even further. However he was later to abandon this policy after coming under pressure from the landed classes, who were his natural supporters, and some of the large industrial cartels, and protective tariffs were reintroduced.

Religious Policy (Problem 5) : The Catholics of southern Germany feared that that they would be overwhelmed by the Protestant majority from the north, so they formed the Centre party with the specific aim of protecting Catholic interests. Bismarck was concerned about the possible conflict of loyalties for the Catholic Germans if Germany found herself in conflict with Catholic Austria or France. Bismarck saw this as a cultural struggle, **Kulturkampf**, between church and state. He embarked on a severe attack on the influence and power of the Catholic church within Germany (see page 100 of textbook).

This was to prove totally counter-productive and Catholics followed a policy of passive resistance and the Centre Party grew in strength. His policy was a massive over-reaction and created far more problems than had ever existed in the first place - there had never really been any doubt about the loyalty of the Catholic Germans until Bismarck embarked upon his misguided policy.

In the end Bismarck abandoned his attack on the Catholics as it was clearly not succeeding. Also, there was a new more flexible Pope, Bismarck was seeking a closer alliance with Catholic Austria, and Bismarck now needed the support of the Centre Party in the Reichstag as he had lost the support of the Liberals due to his abandonment of a free-trade policy. Some historians (Craig) believe that the Kulturkampf did lasting damage to the unity of Germany, while others think that while it may have caused no long-term harm, it did mean Bismarck had to do a great deal of work to repair the relationship with the Catholics - a task which he could easily have avoided if he had not embarked on this policy in the first place. There were no further problems with the Catholics during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II

National Minorities (Problem 6): Generally a policy of Germanisation was followed in an attempt to eliminate these minorities' own cultures. These harsh policies to make the minorities speak only German in schools and offices were in the main unsuccessful and merely hardened their resistance against German rule. In particular, Polish nationalism was seen as a threat which could lead to the loss of German territory if Polish independence was allowed to succeed. Therefore, a policy of German colonisation of the Polish lands was introduced by Bismarck.

This repressive policy was at first abandoned by the new Kaiser after 1890, as he attempted to be popular with all elements of his empire, and the "Germanising" of Alsace/Lorraine and Posen (German Poland) was relaxed, but Bismarck's policy of colonisation was reintroduced in 1909 along with the confiscation of land of Polish landlords to hand over to Germans. The problems of these minorities were never really resolved throughout the period 1871-1914.

Growth of Socialism (Problems 7-9): The German Social Democratic Party formed in 1874 followed fairly moderate social democratic policies, but nevertheless their demands for nationalisation of the major industries and greater social equality were enough to make Bismarck decide that they had to be dealt with. He introduced harsh anti-socialist laws to destroy the party and the movement in Germany (see page 102 of textbook). This however was not successful as it merely drove the socialists underground and made them even harder to monitor and control. Support for the party continued to grow and their policies became more extreme.

Bismarck then decided to take away support from the socialists by implementing their less extreme policies himself. This led to the introduction of quite advanced social reform such as Sickness and Accident Insurance Laws in 1883 and 1884 and Old Age Pensions in 1889. They did not however gain Bismarck any advantage as he was condemned by all sides. The Liberals and Conservatives condemned him for encouraging Communism, the Socialists saw them as "crumbs from the rich man's table", while the working classes saw through Bismarck's tactics and

continued to support the growing Social Democratic Party. Bismarck then changed tack again and dropped all restrictions on the Social Democrats, hoping that they would immediately embark on agitation and violence which would give him the opportunity to use military force to crush the socialists once and for all. However, this was no more successful as the socialists simply campaigned peacefully and legally which brought them good results in the 1890 election (35 seats).

Overall Bismarck's handling of the socialists was a failure and the party continued to grow in strength, but the growth of Socialism was one which all European countries were facing and was unlikely to be checked - no matter what tactics were employed. Bismarck's mistake was that he had allowed his dislike of them to cloud his judgement, and as with the Catholics he perceived a far greater threat than that which actually existed.

Kaiser Wilhelm II tried at first to be a popular monarch by introducing policies to try to please everyone (see above on national minorities). This saw him lift all bans on the socialists and the introduction of social reforms on factory hours for women and children, the banning of Sunday working and the appointment of factory inspectors. However, in response to demands from the Junker and conservative landed interests, and due to the still growing support for the Social Democratic Party, Wilhelm decided to follow a more conservative course and laws restricting the powers of the socialists and the trade unions were introduced as the Kaiser and his chancellors backed the employers in a series of major industrial disputes. Kaiser Wilhelm II had finally realised that it was not possible to be the King of all the Germans from all classes and all walks of life - and he reverted to conservative policies to further the interests of his own class. This can also be seen in his reintroduction of a protectionist commercial policy (see above). In 1914 the Kaiser remained in control of Germany with the opposition being kept in check by repression. However if the First World War had not intervened the growing force of working class supported trade unions and socialist parties would have forced reform on the German system of government or serious revolutionary activity would have broken out.

Conclusion

The creation of a united Germany gave rise to a number of serious issues which had to be resolved before it could be called united in reality as well as in name. While it was not a period of "prolonged crisis" it was without doubt a very difficult infancy for the new country, with the main problems being how to reconcile the conflicting interests of the various classes and pressure groups contained within its borders.

If anything Bismarck was too concerned with the possible threats to the country and he showed a very poor touch in his domestic policies as can be seen in his handling of the Catholic situation where he created a major problem where none really existed in the first place. His heavy-handed approach was also a failure in dealing with the challenge of socialism, but this was a problem which would have been difficult to contain no matter what policy was employed. In general however, we must judge Bismarck's policies as not helping forge a united country in the years 1871-1890. His social legislation (even if not introduced for the right reasons) was beneficial however.

When Kaiser Wilhelm II took over control of the country he was keen to win the support of all the German people and pursued a fairly liberal set of policies at first. These were to be abandoned when it became clear that the conflicting interest of the different social classes could not all be satisfied and The Kaiser reverted to defending the interests of the industrialists and the landowning classes at the expense of the working classes. The greatest disaster of all though was the Kaiser's willingness to let the military leaders play an ever-increasing role in the making of policy, while side-lining the civilian government and his chancellors. This lead ultimately to the destruction of a country which had been in existence for just over forty years.